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Rational Religion and Toleration

Ralph Cudworth and Other Platonists

DIANA STANCIU

In *A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons* on March 31st, 1647¹, Ralph Cudworth insisted that humans "truly know Christ" when and only when they "keep his commandments"². As he put it, "the sons of Adam are now as busy as ever himself was about the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, shaking the boughs of it and scrambling for the fruit, whilst [...] many are too unmindful of the Tree of Life"³. He disapproved of the "bookish Christians", that "have all their religion in writings and papers" as if religion were "nothing but a little book-craft, a mere paper-skill"⁴. The "vulgar sort" – he continued – "think that they know Christ enough out of their Creeds, and Catechisms, and Confessions of Faith". The "more learned", if they can but "wrangle and dispute about Christ, imagine themselves to be grown great proficient in the school of Christ"⁵. The greatest part of the world, wheather learned or unlearned, "think that there is no need of purging and purifying their hearts for the right knowledge of Christ and his Gospel" and that they may know Christ sufficiently "out of their mere systems and bodies of divinity" which are themselves useful, but "in a subordinate way"⁶.

The truth is, Cudworth maintained, that "our Saviour prescribed his disciples another method to come to the right knowledge of Divine Truths, by doing of God's will". The true Christian is not only "book-taught", but "God-taught". Ink and paper can never make us Christians, can never "beget a new nature, a living principle in us"⁷ that makes our heart be into an absolute conformity with the word of God. And later Cudworth continues: "Christ came not into the world to fill our heads with mere speculations, to kindle a fire of wrangling and contentious dispute amongst us and to warm our spirits against one another [...] Christ came not to possess our brains only with some cold opinions [...] Christ was Vitae Magister, not Scholae [...]"⁸. We do not know Christ indeed "by our acquaintance with systems and models of divinity, not by our skill in books and papers, but by our keeping of Christ's commandments". All the books and writings can but represent "spiritual objects to our understandings [...] which yet we can never see in their own true figure, colour and proportion until we have a divine light within, to irra-

¹ Ralph CUDWORTH, *A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons on March 31, 1647, being a Day of Public Humiliation*, Thomas Hodgson, Liverpool and Edmund Fry, London, 1831.

² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

diate and shine upon them"¹. If there is a flesh and a spirit, a body and a soul in all the writings of the scriptures, "it is but the flesh and body of divine truths that is printed upon paper"². The soul and spirit of divine truths can dwell nowhere "but in a spiritual being, in a living thing, because itself is nothing but life and spirit"³.

To conclude, Cudworth contends that holiness is "the conformity of our wills to the will of God", "our direct participation in the will of God, not necessarily mediated by our intellect"⁴. Our happiness does not merely reside in abstract knowledge, but rather in a "certain divine temper" and "constitution of soul" which is far above it. It is "a piece of that corruption that runs through human nature – he explains – that we naturally prize truth more than goodness, knowledge more than holiness"⁵. Perfect happiness consists in nothing but "obedience to the divine will". Happiness is nothing but that "inward sweet delight" that will arise from the harmonious agreement between our wills and God's will⁶.

One may think here of Cudworth's Platonic stand that made him conceive the divine "with a certain latitude". As in Plato the concept of "aitia" implies on the one hand the One and Perfect, "to hen agathon", but on the other hand includes also "nous" and "psyche", Cudworth finds this latitude in the divine through the Trinity. The immediate consequence is that Ethics, Aesthetics, Logic and Religion are inseparable from each other and are ultimately one⁷. The finite life and thought participate in the Absolute in a comprehensive manner. It is not only logical deduction that leads to the true knowledge of God, but the complete human being into a complete identification with the Creator.

Moreover, since in thinking we depend upon experience, it is impossible for our knowledge to proceed in a linear progression. No system can therefore be built up by the method of deduction alone. The whole is never given to us, it cannot become the object, either of knowledge or of doubt. Therefore, in knowledge we proceed from one problem to another, but we have the possibility, from whatever particular problem we may start, to push through to the centre of all knowledge, the knowledge of the Perfect⁸.

One may also sense here a veiled criticism of Descartes's deductive method, although initially Cudworth and the whole group of Cambridge Platonists⁹ he was

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Cf. Lydia GYSL, *Platonism and Cartesianism in the Philosophy of Ralph Cudworth*, Herbert Lang, Bern, 1962, p. 158.

⁵ Ralph CUDWORTH, *A Sermon...cit.*, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Cf. Lydia GYSL, *Platonism and Cartesianism...cit.*, p. 156.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ The Cambridge Platonists were fellows or students of two colleges in Cambridge: Christ's and Emmanuel. Benjamin Whichcote (1609-83), Henry More (1614-87), Ralph Cudworth (1617-88) and John Smith (1618-52) formed the inner circle of the movement and Benjamin Whichcote seems to have been the leading figure among them. There was also an outer circle of thinkers outside Cambridge and some latitudinarian divines could be themselves counted among the Cambridge Platonists. Other contemporaries associated with the group were Nathaniel Culverwell (1619-51) and Peter Sterry (1613-72). Among their younger followers can be counted George Rust (d. 1670), John Norris (1657-1711) and Anne Conway (c. 1630-79). Two other kindred spirits could be Joseph Glanville (1638-80) and Jeremy Taylor (1613-67). But even the four main thinkers of the group were actually more independent of one another than the label of "Cambridge Platonism" may imply. Their criticism of Hobbes's philosophy served more, perhaps, than

part of hailed Cartesianism as the modern philosophy most likely to link their theistic demands and the mechanical view of nature upheld by the new philosophy. Later they discovered that Cartesianism was more "mechanical" than "transcendent" and, consequently, not suitable for studying the phenomena of the world. The "assistance of a substance distinct from the matter, that is, of a spirit or being incorporeal" was considered necessary by More, for instance¹. And, as we have already seen before, Cudworth himself emphasised it when asserting that the soul and spirit of divine truths "can dwell nowhere but in a spiritual being, in a living thing, because itself is nothing but life and spirit"².

Upon a more detailed analysis of their epistemological frame of reference and considering the opposition expressed by the Cambridge Platonists against empiricism, one can observe that, anticipating Leibniz and Kant, Cudworth³ and More⁴ frequently pointed out that the conditions of knowledge cannot be satisfied by the senses. Knowledge requires judgment (which the senses cannot provide), universality and necessity (while the senses show us only particularity and contingency), knowledge demands activity (while senses are passive since sensations should conform to innate laws), knowledge requires the identity of the knower and the known, reason's contemplation of its own creations (while the object of senses is given, distinct from the knower).

Thus, contrary to empiricism, the Cambridge Platonists advocated a rationalist paradigm of knowledge. For instance, Cudworth maintains that true knowledge derives from deduction, being a descending comprehension of things from universal ideas and not an ascending perception of them from the senses. Cambridge Platonists' view on innate ideas was the apparent target of Locke's famous polemic.

anything to unite them. The common element in their thinking was a liberal theological outlook rather than a consistent set of philosophical doctrines. In epistemology, the Cambridge Platonists were critics of empiricism, stressing the role of reason in knowledge. They also criticized conventionalism and held there are essential or natural distinctions between things. In metaphysics, Cambridge Platonism is considered the most systematic attempt in seventeenth century English thought to reconcile reason and faith, the new natural philosophy and Christian revelation. Accepting the methods and naturalism of the new sciences, they nevertheless opposed their mechanical model of explanation because it seemed to leave no room for spirit, God and life. In ethics, Cambridge Platonists defended moral realism and freedom of the will against the voluntarism and determinism of Hobbes and Calvin. They seem to have provided the inspiration behind latitudinarianism and ethical rationalism.

¹ See the letter of More to Boyle from 4 Dec. 1665, quoted in C.A. PATRIDES (ed.), *The Cambridge Platonists*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 30, n. 3.

² Ralph CUDWORTH, *A Sermon...cit.*, p. 11.

³ Works of Ralph CUDWORTH, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Richard Royston, London, 1678; Facsim. Fromamm, Stuttgart, 1964; Reprint, ed. G.A.J. ROGERS, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1995, 3 vols.; *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, J & J Knapton, London, 1731; Reprint, ed. S. HUTTON, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; *A Treatise of Freewill*, ed. John ALLEN, London, 1838; Reprint, ed. S. HUTTON, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1996.

⁴ Works of Henry MORE: *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, J. Flesher, London, 1656, in *Opera Omnia*, J. Maycock for J. Martyn & W. Kettilby, London, 1675-79, 3 vols.; Reprint, G. Olms, Hildesheim, 1966, 2 vols. in 3 tomes, t. II, 2; *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, J. Flesher, London, 1660, in *Opera Omnia*, t. I; *Enchiridion Ethicum*, London, 1667, in *Opera Omnia*, t. II, 1; *Divine Dialogues*, London, 1668, in *Opera Omnia*, t. II, 1; *Enchiridion Metaphysicum*, London, 1671, in *Opera Omnia*, t. II, 1; all these also to be found in *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings*, London, 1662; Reprint Garland, New York and London, 1978. See also *The Conway Letters*, ed. M. NICOLSON, rev. S. HUTTON, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992.

But Cudworth and More explicitly rejected the view that the mind has pre-formed ideas prior to experience. They understood "innateness" in terms of the inherent activities and faculties of the mind and stressed that these had to be stimulated by experience.

Moreover, both Cudworth and More criticised Descartes' radical scepticism, that posed a serious challenge to the rationalism of the Cambridge School. Their views can be summarised like this:

1) Descartes could not escape his radical doubt by his proof of the existence of God since such a demonstration presupposes the truth of our faculties;

2) a false premise behind Cartesian doubt was that knowledge requires the correspondence between concepts and an external reality; since reason creates its object in the act of knowing, we need not seek truth outside ourselves (the Aristotelian theory of truth as correspondence between concepts and things, propositions and facts is challenged here);

3) finally, we have no general reason to doubt our faculties if they normally supply clear and distinct ideas on specific occasions.

All things considered, I would observe here that Cambridge Platonists had quite an ambivalent attitude towards the new natural philosophy. While they admired its methods of observation and experiment, shared its distaste for the verbiage of the old scholasticism and accepted its naturalism and its belief that everything conforms to the law, they also feared the consequences of the new mechanical model of explanation provided by Descartes or Boyle.

Cudworth and More insisted that mechanism alone cannot account for such phenomena as gravity and cohesion in the material world, or generation and growth in the organic world. To explain them, they postulated the existence of a "plastic power" or "spirit of nature", a concept deriving from that of "logoi spermatikoi" or "rationes seminales" of the Stoic and Neoplatonic tradition and also from the Platonic "anima mundi". This concept posits a living force within matter, a self-generating and self-organizing power, subconscious, but still purposive, the instrument of God himself, the means by which he achieves his ends in the material world. This spirit is not an occult force and it avoids the extremes of supernaturalism, since it admits constant miracle in nature, and mechanism, since it derives design from chance. Only the "plastic power" explains design according to the requirements of naturalism.

More claimed that the dangers of the new mechanism are obvious in Descartes' distinction between mind and body as thinking and extended substance. If only matter is extended, then spirit cannot exist. What is not extended cannot exist anywhere or in any place. Consequently, spirit is itself extended, its essential matter consisting of a fourth dimension – "spissitude" – the power to expand or contract the space it occupies. Infinite space is not the exclusive attribute of matter, it has many attributes in common with God himself and amounts to divine presence in nature itself.

However, in spite of criticizing Cartesian dualism, Cambridge Platonists introduced one of their own: they attributed opposing characteristics to spirit (which was indivisible, active and penetrable) and matter (which was divisible, passive and impenetrable). "Plastic power" was postulated to uphold the continuity of nature and it was also understood as a spiritual substance, distinct in kind from matter. Still, unlike the materialists of the 18th century, Cambridge Platonists did not employ this doctrine to show that mind and body differ only in degree as if they were more or less organized forms of living force.

Going back now to the sermon preached by Cudworth before the House of Commons, one may also infer, upon first reading it, that it is divine will and then divine grace he hints at as the only path to knowledge and, ultimately, salvation. Human free will is not mentioned at all. That "divine light within" may be interpreted as divine grace itself and in that case the sermon may be taken as opposing some of the main ideas of the Cambridge Platonists. Needless to say that we have to take into account the style a sermon should display and the message it should contain especially when it is preached before the Parliament, where Oliver Cromwell may have also been present, and when the preacher has the sum of £20 voted for him for "a pains-taking and heart-searching sermon"¹. But still the Cambridge Platonists are renowned for their anti-Hobbesian and anti-Calvinist views. And, again, if Cudworth advocated such ideas, why would he conceive later of "an intellectual system of the universe"? Beyond the milder tone used by Cudworth, what is the difference between his standpoint and Luther's, for instance, in *De servo arbitrio* (*On the Enslaved Will*)?

As it was already established by many scholars, the Reformation represented a thrust back upon the Augustinian conception of dogma. For Luther and Calvin, dogma became the real support and core of theology. The break with humanism was thus inevitable. The humanists' defense of the autonomy of the will, which was not completely forfeited by the fall, seemed to Luther nothing less than an unmasked expression of religious skepticism. But Cudworth was against dogmatics, as we have seen. The dogmatics are presented in his sermon as "the vulgar sort", pursuing just "creeds, catechisms and confessions of faith" and considered even worse than those prone rather to mere deductions and not to true knowledge ("the more learned"). Where is the break then? What is the novelty? Is Cudworth providing us just with a milder version of the same "dogmatic attitude" he is trying to condemn?

A possible explanation would be that Cudworth published just two sermons: this one and *A Sermon Preached to the Honourable Society of Lincolne's Inne* (1664) and both were circumstantial. The real core of his work are the treatises and even in his sermons, if we read between the lines, his attitude may show a certain flexibility of thought. For instance, the holiness that Cudworth advocates and that we have already referred to is "nothing else but God stamped and printed upon the soul" since "divine wisdom hath so ordered the frame of the whole universe, as that every thing should have a certain proper place, that should be a receptacle for it"². He speaks now of "divine will and commandments" and then of "divine wisdom" and "frame of the universe" and these latter notions are not completely different from his notions in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678).

However, the matter is far from being clear and I think a possible key here would be the question I already formulated: Why did Ralph Cudworth conceive of an "intellectual system of the universe"? And I would continue by asking: "Why a system?" and "Why intellectual?" The answer seems to refer to the three fundamentals or essentials of true religion that he enlists at the very beginning of his treatise:

1) that all things do not float without a head and governor; but there is a head and a governor, there is an omnipotent being presiding over all;

2) that God has an essential goodness and justice and that the differences of good and evil, honest and dishonest are not by mere will and law only, but by

¹ Ralph CUDWORTH, *A Sermon...*cit., Preface.

² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

nature; and consequently, that the deity cannot act, influence and necessitate men to such things as are in their own nature evil (Thus God is but the efficient, not the formal cause of things);

3) that necessity is not intrinsic to the nature of everything; men have such a liberty or power over their own actions as may render them accountable for the same and blame-worthy when they do wrong; and consequently, that there is a justice distributive of rewards and punishments, running through the world¹.

Cudworth's further explanations on the three points mentioned above can provide us with the answer: "I say, *these three* (which are the most important things that the mind of man can employ itself upon) taken all together, make up the wholeness and entireness of that, which is here called by us *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*; in such a sense, as atheism may be called, a false system thereof: the word intellectual being added to distinguish it from the other, vulgarly so called, systems of the world (that is, the visible and corporeal world), the Ptolemaic, Tychonic and Copernican; the two former of which are now commonly accounted false, the latter true"². And we could add here the "systems and bodies of divinity", the dogmatic religious views he referred to in his sermon.

We may assume from this that "an intellectual system" means for Cudworth a "system" that pertains, in genuine Platonic tradition, to the realm of the "intelligible", as opposed to that of the "sensible". And that hints also at the great ambitions of the work, that besides its tremendous length and scholarship, is intended to provide the foundation for true religion, rationally moral behaviour and tolerance while displaying a confutation of atheism, in spite of its author's modest assertions:

"And this we conceive may fully satisfy, concerning our general title, all those who are not extremely critical or captious, at least as many of them as have ever heard of the astronomical systems of the world: so that they will not think us hereby obliged, to treat of the hierarchy of angels and of all the several species of animals, vegetables and minerals, etc. [...] that is, to write *De Omni Ente*, of whatsoever is contained within the complexion of the universe. Though the whole scale of entity is here also taken notice of"³.

Seen from this perspective, the *Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons* seems rather to support the idea pointed out at the beginning that it is not only logical deduction that leads to the true knowledge of God, but the complete human being into a complete identification with the Creator. And all this bears a great relevance on such matters as freedom of the will and tolerance. "The intellectual system" thus devised is connected to the "eternal and immutable morality" which is itself a pre-condition for tolerance.

Cudworth was in fact writing his *Intellectual System of the Universe* against determinism and predestination, considered to be the real dangers for all theisms. For Cudworth, as for all the other Cambridge Platonists, freedom of the will was the main imperative and he founded his defence of it on the law of nature, itself expressed in the power of reason every human being was endowed with. As he specified in his dedicatory note to Lord Finch, Cudworth was writing, in an age of

¹ Ralph CUDWORTH, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, facsimile edition prepared by Bernard Fabian, Georg Olms, Hildesheim and New York, 1977, vol. I, Preface, p. 3.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

so much "debauchery, scepticism and infidelity"¹, an apology ("apologia" – defense of...), initially intended to be just a discourse concerning liberty and necessity or, plainly, a "discourse against the fatal necessity of all actions and events, which would serve the design of atheism and undermine Christianity and all religion" taking away "all guilt and blame, punishments and rewards, and plainly rendering a day of judgment ridiculous"².

Cudworth needs a "system" of knowledge in order to convince men of their errors, but the truth provided by this system is supposed to be advocated and followed with meekness and benevolence. Thus, again in *A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons* on March 31, 1647, he insists that

"The gospel at first came down upon the world gently and softly, like the dew upon Gideon's fleece; and yet it quickly soaked quite through it; and doubtless this is still the most effectual way to promote it farther. Sweetness and ingenuity will more powerfully command mens' minds than passion, sourness, and severity [...] When we would convince men of any error by the strength of truth, let us withal pour the sweet balm of love upon their heads. Truth and love are two of the most powerful things in the world; and when they both go together, they cannot easily be withstood"³.

And we should not forget this sermon was addressed to the Parliament, where Cromwell was probably present himself, especially when reading the next fragment:

"Let us take heed we do not sometimes call that zeal for God and his Gospel, which is nothing else but our own tempestuous and stormy passion. True zeal is a sweet, heavenly, and gentle flame, which makes us active for God, but always within the sphere of love. It never calls for fire from heaven to consume those that differ a little from us in their apprehensions. It is like that kind of lightning (which the philosophers speak of) that melts the sword within, but singeth not the scabbard: it strives to save the soul, but hurteth not the body. True zeal is a loving thing, and makes us always active to edification, and not to destruction [...] We may learn what kind of zeal it is that we should make use of in promoting the gospel, by an emblem of God's own given us in the scripture, those fiery tongues that upon the day of Pentecost sat upon the apostles"⁴.

Therefore in *A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons* Cudworth remains within his "intellectual system" – in the Platonic realm of the intelligible, excluding passions and enthusiasm and that cannot but promote tolerance. It is not only that he intends to endorse an authentic knowledge of God, that keeps alive that "divine light within" and gets beyond mere dogma or speculation, but he also tries to induce that spirit of tolerance that he felt his audience was missing.

And leaving aside all the rhetoric and the apparent lack of interest for the issue of free will, I would remark here that the sermon briefly presents Cudworth's main ideas in his philosophic treatises the way "Letter 19" addressed by Marsilio Ficino⁵

¹ *Ibidem*, Dedicatory note.

² *Ibidem*, Preface, p. 1.

³ IDEM, *A Sermon*...cit., pp. 50-51.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁵ Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) was one of the most important philosophers working under the patronage of the Medici family in Florence during the High Renaissance. Ficino has been renowned as a translator of Platonic philosophy from Greek into Latin. He offered the first complete Latin

to John of Hungary (whoever he may have been)¹, almost two hundred years before, expresses in a nutshell some of its author's ideas in important works of his such as *Theologia Platonica* (*Platonic Theology*) or *De christiana religione* (*On Christian Religion*).

Why do I refer here to Ficino though? And which were these ideas very well expressed in "Letter 19" that we also find in Ficino's main works? I refer to Ficino because he wrote against atheism or irreligious modes of thought as well as Cudworth. As "Letter 19" may prove, he even used sometimes the same arguments as Cudworth:

"For the whole world was seized by the Aristotelians and divided for the most part into two schools of thought, the Alexandrian and the Averroist. The Alexandrians consider our intellect to be subject to death, while the Averroists maintain that there is only one intellect. They both equally undermine the whole of religion"².

In his *Theologia platonica de immortalitate animae* (*Platonic Theology: On the Immortality of the Soul*) (1474), Ficino defends religion against Epicurean and Lucretian free-thinkers, who wish to explain religion from pathological states, political factors or the influence of the stars. Generally, Ficino's most important philosophical work, was designed to use Platonic arguments to combat the Averroists, "impious" scholastic philosophers who denied that the immortality of the soul could be proven by reason. He believed that religious belief in his day was under threat from the growing estrangement of piety from philosophy. On the one hand there were the priests and other religious authorities, too ignorant of philosophy to defend Christianity; on the other hand there were the impious university philosophers, chiefly those whom Ficino labelled the "Averroists" and "Alexandrians" (meaning followers of Averroes' and Alexander of Aphrodisias' interpretations of Aristotle), who denied the ability of philosophy to prove such central canons of the faith like the immortality of the soul.

In Ficino's view, the medieval attempt to integrate Christianity and Aristotelian philosophy had reached no satisfactory conclusion. Ficino considered that the best way to resist the growing autonomy of philosophy from religion in the schools was neither to retreat to fideism nor to seek a more successful Christian interpretation of Aristotle, but to replace Aristotle with Plato as the primary philosophical authority of Christendom. It was Ficino's belief that Plato, who had believed in creation and in the immortality of the soul, would provide a better foundation for Christian belief than Aristotle, who had believed in the eternity of the world and had proved quite

version of the works of Plato (1484) and Plotinus (1492). His translations also contain his own philosophical commentaries and these exercised a great influence on the interpretation of Platonic philosophy in the Renaissance and early modern period.

¹ Cf. Biographical notes in *The Letters of Marsiglio Ficino*, Vol. 7 (Book 8), transl. from Latin by the members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, Shephard-Walwyn, London, 2003, p. 200. The identity of the person sending "Letter 18" and receiving "Letter 19" has been much discussed. Among the candidates was Janus Pannonius, Bishop of Pécz (1434-1472), but he died before the presumed exchange of these letters (1485). It could also be János Vitéz, the nephew of János Vitéz, Archbishop of Esztergom (1408-1472). But, there is still a further possibility: that the exchange of letters be only partly based on actual correspondence and represent rather a literary device. Ficino may have remembered his discussions with Janus Pannonius in the 1460s and may have written the letter much later.

² "Letter 19", in *The Letters of Marsiglio Ficino*, cit., p. 22.

unclear on the immortality question. In this, Ficino was supported by the authority of Augustine himself, who in *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*) had declared Plato to be the pagan philosopher closest to the spirit of Christianity.

One should add here that Ficino's concept of universal religion had a great impact on the Cambridge Platonists in general and specifically on Cudworth's idea of rational religion although Cudworth never quoted Ficino. Upon a more subtle analysis, Ficino's idea of universal religion could even provide the link between Cudworth's "intellectual system of the universe" and his "eternal and immutable morality", which later becomes for him a pre-condition for tolerance.

Moreover, Ficino himself emphasized the importance of reason in religion:

"It pleases divine Providence in these times [of irreligion] to strengthen the very substance of her own religion with philosophical authority and reason until, at an appointed time, she confirms the truest form of religion with miracles manifesting among all peoples, as she did in times past"¹.

For Ficino as well as for Cudworth religion was founded on natural reason. And I will explain these assertions in what follows.

Ficino's idea that "the primitive theology of the Gentiles" had begun with Zoroaster or perhaps with the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, had then passed to Orpheus and Pythagoras and several others and had at last found "its way entire" into the books of "our Plato" is already well known and much debated². In "Letter 19" it is expressed like this:

"Therefore, because divine Providence wills to recall all people to herself in a wonderful way, according to their individual natures, it happened that a certain holy philosophy was born in times past both among the Persians under Zoroaster and among the Egyptians under Hermes, her sound true to herself in both peoples. She was subsequently nurtured among the Thracians, under Orpheus and Aglaophemus, and soon grew to maturity, under Pythagoras, among the peoples of Greece and Italy. But it was by divine Plato in Athens that she was finally brought to perfection"³.

This idea was formulated with such precision and imagination by none of the Cambridge Platonists, but a variant of it appears to be implicit in Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* and it was once outlined by More in the following lines:

"Plato's school
[...] well agrees with learned Pythagore,
Egyptian Trismegist, and th' antique roll
Of Chaldee wisdom, all which time hath tore
But Plato and deep Plotin do restore"⁴.

The idea of a universal religion preached by the Platonists of Florence spread from Renaissance Italy all over Europe. It influenced the poetry and aesthetic

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

² Marsilio FICINO, *De christiana religione*, Ch. XXII, p. 25, quoted and discussed in Gunar ASPELIN, *Ralph Cudworth's Interpretation of Greek Philosophy: A Study in the History of English Philosophical Ideas*, Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, Göteborg, 1943, pp. 33 sq. Numerous other scholars discuss this idea. See also C.A. PATRIDES (ed.), *The Cambridge Platonists*, cit., pp. 6 sq.

³ "Letter 19", in *The Letters of Marsiglio Ficino*, cit., p. 22.

⁴ Henry MORE, "Psychozoia", I.4, in *Philosophical Poems of Henry More*, ed. by Geoffrey BULLOUGH, Manchester, 1931, p. 12.

thought of the Elisabethan Age. And More himself was an enthusiastic admirer of Spenser's *Faery Queen*, the influence of this famous author of the English Renaissance epic being obvious exactly in More's poem *Psychozoia* (or *The Life of the Soul*)¹. The doctrine of the Greek philosophy as a continuation of the ancient wisdom of the Orient can be also found with Frenchmen like Symphorien Champier, with Germans like Reuchlin or with Italians like Augustinus Steuchus Eugubinus and Francisco Patrizzi.

The existence of a continued tradition is here the essential matter these authors wanted to point out and it stays in good connection to the very Platonic idea of knowledge as "anamnesis". We find the idea of a continued tradition and of theology and philosophy built on revelation with Roger Bacon as well. Joseph Glanville himself, in spite of being a defender of the ideal of science and of the new philosophy of Francis Bacon and Descartes, invokes sometimes the principle of tradition and age (especially regarding the Aristotelians). Where Cudworth develops his speculations (in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*) concerning the history of the philosophy of religion in Antiquity, he follows the lines of thought of Ficino and of later Renaissance humanists. In his battle against atheism, he wishes to show that faith in a Supreme Being belongs to the most ancient and universal philosophy of mankind.

What is more important then, is the fact that, according to the Cambridge Platonists, it was only by admitting an authentic transcendence that one could resist the kind of relativism that regarded all authority as an artificial creation. And this authentic transcendence could only derive from the "prisca theologia" – that ancient theology embodied, according to the tradition of Florentine Platonists, in the teachings of Moses, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Plato and even Aristotle sometimes². The Platonic framework allowed the eternal truths to be set against the supposed creation of those truths. Morality was itself concerned with the immutable nature of justice, which was never arbitrary. (The idea originated, in fact, in Plato's *Euthyphro* – moral good and evil could not be arbitrary things, made by will without nature³.)

In the same train of thought, Cudworth's main work on ethics, his *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, aims to prove that there did exist, as he asserted after the words of Plato, "something naturally and immutably good and just"⁴. Human virtue was not just a function of the social contract, Cudworth and all of the Cambridge Platonists maintained against Hobbes, but a separate, independent quality found in every human being, although often obscured by the blurring effect of circumstance and habit.

¹ Gunar ASPELIN, *Ralph Cudworth's Interpretation...cit.*, p. 10.

² However, in spite of keeping the old pattern in order to pursue his apologetic interests, Cudworth had somehow to take into account the critical philology developed by Isaac Casaubon and Gerhard Vossius. He cannot link historical series of events as the Florence academics, he has to explain his assumptions and argue in detail, although the arguments are not always solid enough since he is an authority in classical literature, but not in classical philology. He is nevertheless more cautious than the Renaissance Platonists. Cf. Gunar ASPELIN, *Ralph Cudworth's Interpretation...cit.*, pp. 36-45.

³ See J.L. BRETEAU, "Un grand espace pour la liberté: le dilemme du libre arbitre dans la pensée de Ralph Cudworth", *Archives de Philosophie*, 58, 3 (1995), pp. 445-454.

⁴ The treatise remained, like almost all his writings, an unfinished though massive one and it was not published until 1731, long after his death in 1688. See *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Georg Olms, Hildesheim and New York, 1979, p. 3.

As I have suggested before, in ethics, Cambridge Platonists' realism and rationalism stemmed from the reaction against Hobbes's and Calvin's voluntarism (the thing's eternal essence or nature, which exists independent of contract, convention or will, makes something good or evil, not the will of some sovereign power – and this is also an idea I have already pointed out). Cambridge Platonists insisted that we know the nature of good/evil through reason alone and reason determines the means and ends of action. Still, they did not advocate an ethics of duty in the modern Kantian sense. They did not distinguish like Kant between adherence to principle and conformity to nature.

Cambridge Platonists also opposed Hobbes's and Calvin's determinism and defended freedom of the will. Moral responsibility was incompatible with the necessity prevalent in nature. They denied the view that human nature had been so corrupted by the Fall that it could not do good by its own efforts. Sin was a disorder, a corruption of an inherently good human nature. People were not naturally selfish and competitive. So, they stressed the social nature of man. Moral life alone brought happiness and fulfilment of a person.

Moreover, action and not contemplation was the end of life and this can be discussed in relation to their general image of "otherworldly" scholars. Highest knowledge was only the result of good conduct. This emphasis on reason, social nature of man, goodness of human nature constantly reappeared in the late 17th and early 18th century in most cases as a reaction to Hobbes views. For instance, Cambridge Platonists were particularly influential on Samuel Butler, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury and Richard Cumberland and they sometimes provided the inspiration behind the ethical rationalism of Samuel Clarke, John Balguy and Richard Price. For example, in 1698, Shaftesbury brought out the first edition of Whichcote's *Sermons*, also writing a comprehensive preface to the book, and he was inspired by both Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* and More's *Enchiridion ethicum* in his *Moralists* and, respectively, *Sensus Communis*.

Yet, instead of constructing an ethical theory *per se*, Cudworth, like many of the other Cambridge Platonists, devoted again most of his treatise on "immutable morality" to an elaboration of the epistemology designed to reinforce his primary claim. Cudworth's attempt to resist Hobbes's materialist relativism and what he saw as the consequent disintegration of the traditional (that is the theological) bases supporting moral thought issued from the widely shared conviction among the Cambridge Platonists (as well as among Florentine Platonists before) that the fundamental characteristics of human mind were always and everywhere the same. In arguing for an unchanging morality, Cudworth insisted that we are given innately the essential capacities to acquire it. In analogy to the principles of mathematics, Cudworth reasoned that we may come only late or never to learn the laws of algebra, but that our knowledge or ignorance of them in no way affects their intrinsic validity and permanence.

The central idea was that, contrary to Hobbes's theory, human reason was not the product of the material forces setting matter in motion and the mind was not simply the passive receptacle of randomly occurring external stimuli. If it were indeed the case that the mind possessed no active properties of its own, Cudworth insisted, then it would have been impossible for us ever to rise above the primitive level of pure sense perception. He wanted to show that there are some ideas of the mind which were not stamped or imprinted upon it from the sensible objects, and therefore they should arise from the innate activity of the mind itself such as the idea of wisdom, folly, prudence, imprudence, knowledge, ignorance, virtue, vice,

honesty, dishonesty, justice, injustice, volition, cogitation and reason itself, which is a species of cogitation, and which is not perceptible by any sense.

And it is on this basis that anything like a universal system of ethics is at all possible. Thus, being part of the "intellectual system", since they are endowed with reason, which has indeed universal validity, humans may establish the so-called "immutable morality" on the basis of their participation to the realm of the intelligible. As Edward Gibbon was later to observe, in the endeavour of the seventeenth-century philosophers "to reconcile the jarring interests of reason and piety", the relentless force of the former was destined finally to prevail¹.

Within the 17th-century dispute concerning the "rule of faith" or the ultimate criterion of religious knowledge, the Cambridge Platonists stood firmly in the camp of reason. They opposed enthusiasm, which appealed to inspiration no less than Roman Catholic "dogmatism", when referring to apostolic tradition. But Cambridge Platonists defended reason conceived as a mystical faculty, as a power of vision guided by divine grace. As we have already seen, they opposed the formal concept of reason prevalent in the nominalist tradition, where reason was seen as merely a power of inference. Reason was not just discursive reason, but a more elevated capacity of the mind. It corresponded to "nous" or "mens", deriving its power from either reflection of or participation in the divine.

Moreover, their concept of reason emphasised practical reason: the mind contained within it the principles of moral conduct. Cambridge Platonists also rejected Socinianism because of its critical attitude towards the traditional Christian doctrine. Regarding the ecclesiastical polity, they chose a middle path between Laudianism and Puritanism, between High Church Anglicanism and Presbyterianism. Anticipating the latitudinarians², they emphasised the need for a comprehensive church with a creed broad enough to accommodate all Christians.

Consequently, in promoting tolerance, Cudworth argued on the basis of the rational order of the universe, promoted by Florentine Platonists as well, which made it intelligible and accessible to human intellect, not to the senses. He used the

¹ Edward GIBBON, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury, Methuen, London, 1909-14; reprint, AMS Press, New York, 1974, I, 33.

² When referring to the latitudinarians, Glanville used to explain that "latitude-men" or "latitudinarians" are words that signify compass or largeness because of their opposition to the narrow stingy temper then called Orthodoxy. In its worse sense, Latitudinarian went for "one of a large Conscience and Practice" (cf. Simon PATRICK, *A Brief Account of the New Sect of Latitude-men*, London, 1662, new edition by T.A. BIRELL, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, 1963). They usually insisted on the freedom of the will considering themselves people who lead an unblameable life but were not too scrupulous about the externals of religion. They neither joined the dissenters nor were prepared to cooperate wholeheartedly in the task of re-establishing a uniform Anglican liturgy and discipline within the university. The younger generation of latitude-men (Patrick, Fowler, Tillotson, Stillingfleet, Tenison, Sharp and Moore) were also Cambridge educated, but they all left the university and became preachers in London. The Cambridge Platonists' mystical and metaphysical theology was quite different from the common-sense appeal to the experience of their congregations which characterised the Cambridge Platonists' younger admirers. Nevertheless both groups shared a common desire to distinguish the inessentials from the irreducible bases of Christianity in order to reduce religious discord. After the Act of Uniformity (1662) and Locke's *Third Letter on Toleration* (1692), against those who put coercive uniformity above pastoral care and moral discipline, after the collapse of the Restoration Church after the Toleration Act of 1689, the formerly harassed latitudinarians were induced to the episcopal bench. At the same time press censorship was put to an end in England.

"argument from design" where Locke would later use the "argument from ignorance" – our inability to settle a knowledge claim¹. Then, it would be worth to ask ourselves what is the need for tolerance in Cudworth's system, where individual or group differences were reduced to universal principles and the rational order of the universe was perceived through those principles which were the "candle of the Lord" set up in the soul of every man that had not wilfully extinguished it.

Indeed, one should not forget that Cudworth's system was an "intellectual" one – that is ideal. Tolerance was to be found or endorsed "in the world" and the ideal system was to be acknowledged exactly by encouraging people "not to put out" that "candle of the Lord" but to let it guide their everyday lives, which otherwise would get disjointed in the multitude of differences and interests and in the conflicts raised by these differences and interests, leading to a hobbesian anarchic state of nature.

Thus, the formerly common image of Cambridge Platonists as perfectly aloof, ivory-tower academics, retaining very little influence in the subsequent century² is once more challenged. Placed in sharp contrast with the active commitment to the world promoted in Bacon's philosophy, theirs was sometimes considered a "purely contemplative attitude, taken from the classical Hellenic ideal as it was found particularly in Plotinus"³.

But more recently, the "practical" dimension of their work, their moral and political concerns received more attention⁴ and the connections between their theories of knowledge, their physics and their metaphysics (together with their more intricate, theological aspect) and their moral and political interests were emphasised, a certain coherence or harmony of their positions being simultaneously pointed out.

New studies have been published on this matter and most of them start from the assumption that Cambridge Platonists were considerably aware of the political turmoil in which their philosophy was developing. Moreover, Cambridge Platonists have lately been perceived as definitely trying to advocate political settlement in the unsettled years of mid-seventeenth century England.

Some scholars agree at least that their philosophy was to offer some of the main ideas that promoted the advancement of religious tolerance in England and that their supposed lack of influence in the eighteenth-century thought was rather "an absorption of their ideas in the more wide-ranging validation of tolerance that was later to happen"⁵. Their influence on Butler, Shaftesbury, Cumberland, Clarke, Balguy, Price or the latitudinarians, discussed above, is already well documented.

Whichever may be the truth, it is obvious anyway that neither Ralph Cudworth nor Henry More were writing treatises of theology and philosophy in an

¹ Unless one knows that he knows what the truth is on some matter, one should not attempt to force others to accept his opinion or to suppress those who propounded a view contrary to one's own.

² See M.F. HOWARD, ed., notes and introd. to *The Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More ... by Richard Ward ... 1710*, London, 1911, pp. 33-34; Dean INGE, the Introduction to the *Moral and Religious Aphorisms of Benjamin Whichcote*, London, 1930, pp. III-IV; Rupert HALL, *Henry More: Magic, Religion and Experiment*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 88.

³ Ernst CASSIRER, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, engl. trans. James P. Pettegrove, Nelson, Edinburgh, 1953, pp. 49-50.

⁴ G.A.J. ROGERS, J.M. VIENNE and Y.C. ZARKA (eds.), *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context: Politics, Metaphysics and Religion*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1997.

⁵ John GASCOIGNE, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

intellectual void. Although Platonic or Neo-Platonic philosophy was the main core of their inspiration, although they sometimes considered themselves as successors of the Platonic Academy in Florence, the Cambridge Platonists were also responding to a contemporary complex intellectual milieu fashioned by the New Science, associated especially with Galileo and Descartes, by the Civil War, threatening the two most important institutions of the time, the Church of England and the Monarchy, by the rise of "enthusiasm" and also by the philosophy of Hobbes. Beyond all these, Cambridge during the Civil War and the Interregnum was hardly the place to favour an apolitical stand, especially when, in November 1643, the parliamentary troops of the Earl of Manchester took over the University removing paintings and imprisoning members¹.

Moreover, most scholars agree that, since their work stood somehow between the system of Descartes and that of Leibniz, between rationalism and empiricism, between ancient and modern science, between religion and philosophy, the Cambridge Platonists' influence was to a certain extent seminal for the formation of modern thought and many of the questions they raised are still worth being pursued. In fact, within the configuration of ideas specific to their time, they tried to connect the most incompatible trends and because of that their ideas were far less monolithic and much harder to classify than those of their contemporaries.

Quite perplexing may be for the modern reader the theological aspect of their work, the system of concepts and metaphors in terms of which their religious, moral and political preoccupations were worked out. It seems nevertheless impossible to understand the transition from one form of modernity – that proposed by Descartes – to the other equally important forms proposed by Leibniz, Newton or Locke, if one neglects the ideas advanced by the Cambridge Platonists. They are to be considered even if the only reason for that would be to understand how other thinkers elaborated their own systems by criticizing the Platonists.

It became, then, a useful attempt for many students of Cambridge Platonism to approach it, as I have already noted, from a "practical" perspective and to present their thought as a reaction against various forms of voluntarism that prevailed at the time. As I have already pointed out, they were definitely writing against Calvinism, which had emphasised predestination and moral legalism, but they were writing as well against the moral relativism and state absolutism generated by Hobbes's theories. The Cambridge school was actually considered even by the contemporaries as the most able opponent of Hobbes's philosophy².

Their doctrine of free will³, close to that of the latitudinarians⁴, also aroused the interest of the Remonstrants in Holland, who were engaged in a struggle

¹ See J.B. MULLINGER, *The University of Cambridge*, vol. 3, Cambridge, 1911, Ch. 3., passim.

² See the account of a contemporary writer: Gilbert BURNET, *History of My Own Time*, 1st ed. 1723-34; Th. Ward, Oxford, 1833, 6 vols.

³ See "More, Locke and the Issue of Liberty", in Sarah HUTTON (ed.), *Henry More (1614-1687). Tercentenary Studies*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1990.

⁴ However, the place of the Latitudinarians in the development of tolerance in England has been much debated. See, for instance, Richard ASHCRAFT, "Latitudinarianism and Toleration", in *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England, 1640-1700*, ed. Richard KROLL, Richard ASHCRAFT and Perez ZAGORIN, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992. According to Ashcraft, the latitudinarians were loyal members of the Church of England, a church that insisted on providing a set body of doctrine, and thus they could not really believe in liberty of conscience. They stood in obvious contrast to the nonconformists. It was the nonconformists who accepted that every individual was made in the image of God and that each had reason and free will and

against rigorous Calvinist dogma and various forms of intolerance. The nature of this liberal morality can be elucidated by comparing the positions of the Arminians with those of the Cambridge Platonists. The correspondence of Cudworth and More, on the one hand, and the writings of van Limborch, the representative of Arminianism¹, on the other hand, may be extremely useful in this sense. And all these are nothing but an invitation to a more thorough analysis of free will and tolerance as they were presented in the works of the Cambridge Platonists.

was capable of acting morally according to his private judgment. And because of the special status of the conscience as God's way of instruction in moral matters, his private judgment would indeed coincide with God's will. By contrast, Anglicans – including Latitudinarians – denied the individuals' right to follow the "wild enthusiasms" of their minds. See also the contemporary account of Simon PATRICK, *A Brief Account of the New Sect of Latitude-men*, cit., n. 43.

¹ P. van LIMBORCH, *Theologia Christiana ad praxin pietatis ac promotionem pacis Christianae unice directa*, H. Wetstein, Amsterdam, 1686. See also R.L. COLIE, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1957.